

ON THE TRAIL  
OF FRANCIS ASBURY

UNTROD PATHS

A FORGOTTEN CHAPLAIN  
OF THE CIVIL WAR:  
COMMANDER JOHN L. LENHART

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Robert Drew Simpson  
*Editor*

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ON THE TRAIL OF FRANCIS ASBURY:  
The Social Origins of Methodism in Western New Jersey

Barbara B. Tomblin

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The Northern New Jersey Historical Society publication for 1985 is devoted to biography, although in each study presented the biographical material reveals significant aspects of our larger social and religious history as Methodists.

Barbara Tomblin's paper, *On The Trail of Francis Asbury*, is a carefully researched study of the social origins of Methodism in western New Jersey. But what the title does not reveal is the extensive material presented concerning the critical role of the laity in providing place and encouragement for the early Methodist itinerants. Much of the study features biographical information which will be of interest to New Jersey historians and genealogists.

Mrs. Tomblin is a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University and is currently assisting in the publication of the Edison papers. She is a lay delegate to Annual Conference from the Union Village United Methodist Church, and a member of the Northern N.J. Historical Society.

The Rev. Frances Lawrie Noll's study, *Untrod Paths*, is an important addition to our Conference history. She offers a thorough view of the often difficult journey of clergywomen in our Conference. Through biographical research and many interviews we are able to see the courage and faith of these clergywomen, and those who supported their pilgrimage.

Frances is Pastor of the Arlington, N.J. United Methodist Church, and together with her husband, William, represent one of our clergy couples.

The article I have written represents research on the life of one of our Conference members, Commander John L. Lenhart. Lenhart went down with his ship, the *U.S. Cumberland*, against the Confederate ironclad, the *Merrimac*, in the battle of Hampton Roads in the Civil War. He was the first Naval Chaplain on record in our nation's history to die in action. This study documents this almost forgotten moment of heroism.

We offer these studies in Methodist history with the hope of preserving our heritage as New Jersey Methodists, but also to challenge others, reading of the past, to live now with deeper resolution and faith.

Robert Drew Simpson, Ph.D.  
Editor  
February 27, 1985

One of the most striking discoveries of any leisurely Sunday drive through the countryside of western New Jersey is the existence of a Methodist church, often the typical little white clapboard country church, in almost every village no matter how tiny. This multitude of small congregations, still active in the faith two hundred years after the founding of the denomination in America, stirs one's imagination. That such a relatively new sect should take hold so tenaciously, spread to so many isolated villages in an era when even the main highways were considered wretched, bespeaks a vigor, an appeal, even a system to be admired generations later.

The origins of this sect called Methodists in the western portions of New Jersey in the late eighteenth century have been partially obscured by time and the absence of complete church records. Particularly scarce are the recollections of the early itinerants who were often too harried, too uneducated, or too exhausted to jot down their memories about the beginnings of circuits and congregations in the state. A few diaries or journals, notably those of Francis Asbury and Ezekiel Cooper, exist, but these leave much of the story untold.

In the absence of detailed records of early Methodist churches and of the travelling preachers, the focus of historical research in the past has been on the more well known itinerants like Asbury and Cooper. This emphasis on bishop and clergy, however, has deflected attention away from the often crucial contribution of laypeople to the process of Methodism's growth in rural areas like western New Jersey. This paper will examine the origins and growth of the denomination in portions of Hunterdon, Warren, and Sussex counties by following Francis Asbury's travels in a traditional historical manner, but also by carefully examining the contribution of the men and women who welcomed the sometimes unpopular Methodist preachers into their homes and upheld the new faith in-between the circuit riders' infrequent visits.

From the complexity of different towns, townships, counties, family names and dates that comprise the early period of Methodism in western New Jersey, one document, overlooked by prior historians of the period, stands out. The document is a deed for a small lot of land to be used for a house of worship in the village of Flanders in Morris County. This deed, recorded on October 3, 1789, was conveyed by Joseph Heaton, Jr. to nine men acting as trustees on behalf of the Methodist society in Flanders.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, these nine trustees were not local landowners or members of the Flanders community. Only one, Jabesh Heaton, the owner of a mill in the village as well as a tract of 552 acres, appears to be from the Flanders vicinity. The other eight gentlemen were William McCullough and William Crevelling of Mansfield, Levi Howell and John Axford of Oxford, Daniel Hunt of Hardwick, Joseph

Swayze of Knowlton Township, Nicholas Egbert of Reading, Hunterdon County, and William Wallen of Somerset County.<sup>2</sup> For some reason, perhaps because of their financial status or their reputation in Methodist circles in the state, these nine individuals agreed to come together in a legal sense at least to sponsor the church at Flanders, the first Methodist church in that entire part of the state. Separated from one another by many miles of poor roads and the absence of modern communications these nine laymen nonetheless were acquainted with one another and with Methodists in Flanders anxious to build a church structure there. Why this village in the center of western New Jersey was chosen remains an unanswered question. What does become clear is that by discovering the identity of these nine "founding fathers" of Methodism in western New Jersey, one can learn much about the social foundations of Methodism in the area and how the denomination grew and prospered in the late 18th century.

The Flanders trustees resided in townships spread over portions of four counties, seemingly unconnected to one another. By following Francis Asbury's journeys across the state as recorded in his journal, a pattern of kinship, religion, and business ties emerges for these laymen.

Francis Asbury's initial visit to western New Jersey was made in April of 1776 when he ventured on horseback from Trenton to Kingwood to Isaac Bonnel's house and back to Trenton stopping awhile at Hopewell.<sup>3</sup> In 1782 with the Revolutionary War coming to an end, Asbury chose a more adventurous route riding into Hunterdon County. On September 4, 1782 he preached at the home of Nicholas Egbert at Pleasant Run near what is today Readington. The village sat astride a main highway linking towns like Amwell on the Delaware River to the Raritan area.<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Egbert was one of the early converts to Methodism on the so-called "East Jersey" circuit. He is supposed to have given a testimonial at a love feast in the area attended by one of the early Methodist itinerants, George Mair.<sup>5</sup> Preachers like Mair were active in the Readington area in the 1780's and their efforts to evangelize were not appreciated by the established Zion Lutheran Church. In July, 1782 that church's vestry book records that "so called Methodist Preachers having visited our Place from time to time and tried to obtrude themselves upon some of our congregation, have, after several fruitless attempts at last prevailed upon some members of our church and some other Neighbors to come under their plan. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

The Dutch Reformed Church also opposed Methodist missionary work in the area and gave Francis Asbury a chilly reception when he visited Readington in 1782. Historian James P. Snell in his 1881 history of Hunterdon and Somerset counties confirmed the presence of conflict within the Dutch church at New Germantown (now Oldwick) where Asbury preached on Sept. 6, 1782. Snell claims that one of the church's wardens, Tunis Melick, was sympathetic to Asbury and allowed him to preach in his home which resulted in some converts.<sup>7</sup> When a husband of one convert complained to the Dutch pastor, the clergyman openly criticized Asbury for evangelizing in the town. Tunis Melick and Major Godfrey Rinehart rose from their pews to de-

fend Asbury and, Snell says, "created a great uproar in the church, and resulting in the disciplining of these vestrymen and their disappearance from the church records."<sup>8</sup>

Francis Asbury's troubles did not end with the established church in New Germantown but included what he saw as harassment by a member of the local Committee on Safety who insisted on examining Asbury's credentials and those of his companions Joseph Everett and Joseph Tunnell.<sup>9</sup> John Lednum in his *History of the Rise of Methodism in America*, states that Everett while preaching in New Germantown in 1782 "stirred the ire of the people about Germantown, in Jersey, and the mob was after him with clubs . . . but finding he was legally qualified to preach he received no hurt from them."<sup>10</sup>

Four years later Ezekiel Cooper preached to a small congregation at Readington on Sept. 5, 1786 and was invited to speak at New Germantown. Cooper wrote in his diary:

I had twice as many as I expected, for the people there are generally opposed to us. I had an invitation from Major Rhynehart to lodge at his home which I accepted. I am informed that a certain gentleman in town, while his family were gone to hear me preach, fastened the door to keep them out, but his heart failed, and at their return he gave them admittance after sometime. I was pleased with an expression that dropped from Esquire Rhynehart's lips, namely, 'Germantown is like a fort, but the Methodists, I think will at last take it.'<sup>11</sup>

Encouraged by the changed attitudes to Methodism his preaching had made in New Germantown, Cooper included the village and the one at Readington on his circuit and preached in each hamlet once every six weeks.

Francis Asbury, now a bishop, returned to New Germantown on July 6, 1806 and lodged with Mindert Farley. He recorded in his journal that "My first visit here was during the Revolutionary War; now the children of people not then married are born, grown up and married."<sup>12</sup> Asbury's observations of the change in the village in twenty-five years' time were very astute. All of the families he mentioned as having championed his cause and opened their homes to his preaching during the Revolution were in fact related by intimate ties of kinship. When Henry Miller wrote to the Dutch pastor to complain about Asbury's influence on his wife's religious views, he no doubt raised the ire of wife Catherine's own brother—Tunis Melick!<sup>13</sup> Tunis came as a young boy with his father from Germany in 1728 to Philadelphia. The Melicks settled in Whitehouse, near Readington, and when Tunis came of age he married a local girl, Eleanor Van Horn.<sup>14</sup> Melick then bought 200 acres of land in New Germantown and some years later added 400 acres to his holdings. He and Eleanor had one son, Peter, and five daughters.

Tunis Melick's conversion to the Methodist cause had important consequences for the spread of Methodism in this area of Hunterdon and even Somerset counties. Mary Catherine, known as "Treenie," Melick, one of his five daughters, married Mindert Farley who is mentioned as Asbury's host in 1806.<sup>15</sup> The couple had a daughter, Barbara, and two sons: Francis Asbury Farley, who became a physician, and Anthony who married Ketuah McCullough, a daughter of Col. William McCullough of Asbury, New Jersey, a prominent Methodist layman in the state.<sup>16</sup>

One of Tunis Melick's older daughters, Anna, married Isaac Farley. His only son Peter sealed the family's close ties with Methodism by taking as his bride Susanna Egbert, the daughter of one of Methodism's earliest converts in Readington, Nicholas Egbert.<sup>17</sup> Susanna and Peter Melick named one son after her father and the other son James. It was James who moved to Peapack and became a trustee of the Peapack Methodist Episcopal Church when it was incorporated in 1838.<sup>18</sup>

When the Methodists of New Germantown incorporated as a society in 1824 the trustees were James Melick, John Melick, Nicholas Egbert Melick, Mindert Farley, Anthony Farley, John Fine, George Bunn, and Jacob Blain. The relationship of the Farleys and Melicks has already been noted, but that of George Bunn should be explored. In 1767 he married Elizabeth Rhinehart who may well have been related to Major Godfrey Rhinehart, one of Asbury's hosts.<sup>19</sup> The major was a prominent man in the town, holding the license for the tavern from 1772 to 1775, owning lots, and running a store.<sup>20</sup>

The connection of the Melick family in New Germantown to the McCulloughs of Asbury village has been noted but bears much closer examination. In 1787 the third quarterly meeting of the East Jersey circuit was held according to Ezekiel Cooper "on this circuit at Mr. McCulloch's, near Readington, on Saturday and Sunday, January 20 and 21."<sup>21</sup> Cooper later recalled that the service on Saturday was well attended and that his host's brother was converted.

The next mention of McCullough's comes in March, 1787 when itinerant Cooper once again riding from place to place on his widely dispersed circuit writes that he stopped at Mrs. Smith's "at the Great Meadows" and then "preached at Captain McCullough's in that vicinity, met a class which had but recently been organized."<sup>22</sup> From Great Meadows, which is the name given to the marshy area along Pequest Creek near Vienna, it would seem that Capt. McCullough lived in the Vienna-Greenwich area. Yet in his diary only two months before Ezekiel Cooper wrote that McCullough lived near Readington. The two villages are not even in the same county and must have been two or more days' ride apart.

According to the memoirs of Nicholas Albertson of Hope, New Jersey, Benjamin McCullough, the father of William, lived in Sussex County.<sup>23</sup> Mr. Albertson writes "preachers in connection with Mr. Wesley found their way into what was called Sussex County (now Warren and Sussex) the first or nearly the first place they visited in the county was the residence of Esquire Benjamin McCullough where they found a kind reception and comfortable resting place."<sup>24</sup> Albertson notes that a class was formed at McCullough's house and that quarterly meetings were held in his "large barn." He also says that McCullough's son William, after he moved to Asbury, supplied his home as a preaching place.

According to A. Van Doren Honeyman, a historian of northwestern New Jersey, Benjamin McCullough owned the mill at the village of Bloomsbury which was called as early as 1750 Johnson's Iron Works, or Johnson's forge after its owner Robert Johnson.<sup>25</sup> Capt. McCullough became the owner of several farms in the area "most of which he obtained by marrying the widow

of the former owner, William Henry, in 1758."<sup>26</sup> The McCulloughs were considered local gentry and Mrs. McCullough, William's mother, was "the first lady who kept her carriage" in this part of New Jersey.<sup>27</sup>

Some confusion about Benjamin McCullough's residence may have resulted from his ownership of land in Bloomsbury which is south of the Musconetcong River and therefore in Hunterdon County. He died without a will in 1789 and lacking any evidence of other offspring it must be assumed that his son William inherited the entire estate which probably included the mill at Bloomsbury and several farms or parcels of land. Young William may have been given part of the family fortune before his father's death for in 1782 Benjamin McCullough advertised the sale of a farm of 243 acres described as being "a very valuable farm in Greenwich township, Sussex County, state of New Jersey, adjoining the Musconetcong Creek, near Robert Johnson's forge and mill."<sup>28</sup> It was reputed to contain a good bearing orchard, a young orchard recently planted, a meadow, and was said to be "in good fence, and wood in proportion to land."<sup>29</sup> Only a year after this farm was advertised William McCullough is said to have moved to the village of Hall's Mills, later called Asbury.

One fact about William McCullough is uncontested—he was known throughout East Jersey as a loyal patriot and respected citizen, a man of prominence in the new state. William was born in 1759 and is known to have enlisted in the Revolutionary Army at seventeen, later serving in his father's company of the Sussex militia. From 1777 to 1781 he was the brigade quartermaster.<sup>30</sup>

At the close of the war Capt. William McCullough moved to Hall's Mills, so named for the grist and saw mills located there. The history of the town claims that settlers were attracted to the location by its excellent soil and the available water power of the Musconetcong River.<sup>31</sup> One of the first settlers of the town was Abram Woolever who built a log cabin near the mills in 1776.<sup>32</sup> He was joined by the Hunt, Richey, and McCullough families. Unlike many Revolutionary War veterans, Capt. William McCullough returned to fulltime civilian life with money in his pocket. He came to Hall's Mills and bought a large tract of land and in time built an oil, saw, and two grist mills.<sup>33</sup> The story goes he was converted to Methodism in 1786 by Ezekiel Cooper and John McClaskey's preaching at Schooley Mountain, but if Nicholas Albertson's memoirs are accurate William may well have been converted during services in his father's home near Bloomsbury.

Francis Asbury and his companion Richard Whatcoat were aware of Capt. McCullough's association with Methodism. One source says McCullough met the Bishop while on business in Trenton. Asbury during his tour of New Jersey in 1789 stopped at "McCulloch's" on June 29th.<sup>34</sup> The young captain's hospitality became well known to Methodist itinerants and most made it a point to stop in the village and lodge with the McCulloughs in the course of their travels. In 1792 a class was formed in the town with Robert Smith as class leader. It was composed of Mr. Smith, Mrs. Esther Richey, William McCullough and his wife, William Crevelling, Mr. Prouse, Mrs. Prouse and a daughter, John Hendrickson and his wife, Mr. Baylor and his wife, Daniel

Hunt and his wife and Jemina Smith.<sup>35</sup> This may not have been the very first class in Hall's Mills for Mr. Albertson noted one in the earliest period of Methodist growth. It should also be noted that both William Crevelling and Daniel Hunt were in this 1792 class and were also trustees of the Flanders church in 1789.

For four years this class met in the home of William McCullough, by now a colonel in the state militia. The beautiful two-story house he built on a hill overlooking the Musconetcong River and the mills in Asbury, as the town was re-named in honor of Francis Asbury, remains today in the village. In 1796 the Methodist Society in Asbury decided to build a church. Mr. Daniel Hunt, a close friend of Col. McCullough's, purchased the land for the church for £15 English money.<sup>36</sup> The deed was signed August 8, 1796 for about one acre of land in the middle of the village close by the road.

Bishop Asbury came on Aug. 9, 1796 to lay the cornerstone for the small 28 by 30 foot chapel. He wrote in his journal, "we sung part of Dr. Watt's hymn on The Corner-Stone, and prayed. I then had to lend a hand to lay the mighty corner-stone of the house: we then sung and prayed, and retired to brother Budd's. . . ."<sup>37</sup>

From his diary we know that Asbury returned to McCullough's and the town named for him on July 20, 1799. He wrote, "I rode in great pain and heat, hungry and sick, twenty-five miles to Col. McCullough's. How welcome a good house, and kind friends and a cold day!"<sup>38</sup> The bishop was relieved of his usual preaching chores by Jesse Lee who preached twice in Asbury during the course of the visit. At this time Bishop Asbury was also joined by a Presbyterian minister, the Rev. John Hanna, who travelled the Warren-Sussex area tending a widely scattered flock.<sup>39</sup>

Eight years after this visit, Asbury returned to the village and noted its growth. On April 23, 1807 he wrote, "There are about forty houses in and about the village."<sup>40</sup> Asbury-town was an important center in the valley in those days and according to Rev. Henderson who wrote a history of Asbury in 1883 the town was largely inhabited by skilled craftsmen—carpenters, masons, and painters.<sup>41</sup>

The cosmopolitan character of "Asbury-town" bothered the Bishop who reflected on his May 9, 1811 visit: "We came to Asbury and I preached and added a special exhortation: were it not for the brewing and drinking miserable whiskey, Asbury-town would be a pleasant place."<sup>42</sup>

This was Bishop Asbury's last known visit to the town. He died in 1816. The colonel lived another twenty-five years during which Methodism spread over the entire state. In Asbury the chapel, for which the Bishop laid the corner stone, was dedicated by the Rev. David Bartine in 1798. Over the years Asbury church heard the preaching of a generation of Methodist itinerants including Manning Force, George Banghart, Francis Morrell, Isaac Winner, Anthony Atwood, Abram Gearhart, and Jacob Hevener. The latter was referred to as an "old-fashioned shouting Methodist."<sup>43</sup>

Throughout these years Col. McCullough remained the church's staunchest supporter and opened his doors to many travelling preachers. He was described as "spare in figure of erect carriage and slow of speech."<sup>44</sup> A

progressive man, the colonel took an active role in securing internal improvements for the state, most notably as a shareholder and motivating force in the New Jersey Turnpike Company. McCullough was also a member of the New Jersey legislature and for thirty years a judge in Sussex and Warren counties.

Three years before Col. McCullough's death a man who signed his name as "R" visited Asbury town and wrote about the colonel in the *Christian Advocate*. He reminded those readers not acquainted with Col. McCullough that the venerable gentleman had joined:

the society with his parents and wife under the ministry of Rev. Ezekiel Cooper, fifty two years ago, when the whole state of New Jersey, and a part of New York, were included in one circuit. He was an officer in the Revolutionary Army in his early days, was present in a number of engagements during the war, and was honored with the acquaintance of Generals Washington and Lafayette and other distinguished men.<sup>45</sup>

Although by 1837 McCullough was slightly hard of hearing he attended the worship service, wrote "R," and stayed until a late hour for the prayer service. After a brief illness Col. McCullough died on Feb. 9, 1840 at his home in Asbury. The funeral sermon was preached by the Rev. Manning Force and the colonel was laid to rest in the graveyard next to the church that he had built. Few Methodist laymen were as well known or respected in New Jersey as William McCullough. His influence in the development of the denomination in New Jersey is indisputable.

Other laymen were equally important to the growth of Methodism in the state and to discover more about their identity Asbury's route must be followed.

Bishop Asbury's initial visits to the Musconetcong River valley and the Hope vicinity of Sussex County were made in June of 1787.<sup>47</sup> He came from Warwick in New York state into Vernon Township where he preached to a crowd in Nathan Benjamin's barn. From Vernon he rode southwest to Johnsonburg probably following the main road which passed through Newtown. At Johnsonburg which was known in the early days as Log Gaol or Log Jail because it was the county seat and boasted the county jail, Asbury preached in the Stone Church, owned by the Episcopalians.

From Johnsonburg, Asbury journeyed on along the main road south to the village of Hope to the home of Joseph Swayze (or "Sweezy"). As was the custom when ordained clergy made one of their infrequent visits to a village, the sacrament was administered. The Swayzes must have been congenial hosts, for the Bishop wrote in his diary "we had a good time."<sup>48</sup>

Joseph Swayze lived on the west side of Hope along a brook called the Muddy Run where in the year 1787 he had just built a grist mill. His family were early settlers in the area and he is said to have shared 500 acres of land there with his brother Barnabas.<sup>49</sup> Joseph, Barnabas, and Daniel Swayze were the three sons of one Israel Swayze. Joseph's home was known to be friendly to Methodist itinerants for Ezekiel Cooper visited there and noted that the fourth quarterly meeting was held at "Sweezy's" in 1786.<sup>50</sup>



The village of Hope was at this time a Moravian settlement with over a hundred inhabitants and a flourishing economy. The area had originally been settled by men of English stock, but in 1769 Samuel Green donated 665 acres of land at Hope to the Moravian church.<sup>51</sup> In 1774 the Moravian Church in Germany designated Hope a full-fledged settlement and it was thereafter operated as a business venture by the church. Town life in Hope revolved around the church which was a cultural center of the region possessing a fine organ and trained organist.

In the vicinity of this tightly-knit religious community were the farms and mills of earlier settlers. The west side of town was where the Swayzes had their farms and on the east lived two families who were to become central to the development of Methodism in the Hope area, the Howells and the Albertsons.

The patriarch of the Howell family was Sampson Howell, Sr. who settled at the foot of Jenny Jump Mountain about 1767 and built a sawmill. Sampson is remembered as "a local preacher and a mighty hunter; tradition says he killed more wild turkeys and bears and wolves than any man in that region."<sup>52</sup> His descendants scattered all over the county and were numerous thanks to Sampson Howell, Jr. and his wife who had eleven children. Sampson Sr.'s eldest son, Levi, became a Methodist probably because of the preaching of travelling Methodist preachers who stayed in his father's house. In his diary for Monday, Nov. 13, 1786 Ezekiel Cooper indicated that he and Rev. Ogden preached at Sampson Howell's home in Hope: "There was a large congregation at the church, likewise in the evening at Sampson Howell's. After Mr. Ogden preached I gave an exhortation."<sup>53</sup>

The New Jersey exploits of the early Methodist preachers like Ezekiel Cooper are not well documented, but in a manuscript hand written in 1835 by Nicholas Albertson of Hope, the early years of Methodism near Hope are remembered. Mr. Albertson was a frail, elderly gentleman by then but anxious to record what he recalled of those early years. He wrote, "from McCulloughs the pioneers of Methodism proceeded northward seeking lost sinners preaching glad tidings of salvation and forming small classes."<sup>54</sup> First he named the preaching place at Mr. Hazens near Hackettstown and then said, "from there to Mr. Daniel Hunt's—then to Mr. Levi Howell's—then to Mr. Joseph Swayze's—then to Mr. Michael Banghart's."<sup>55</sup>

Nicholas Albertson and his wife Jane joined Levi Howell's class at Hope in 1786. Almost a half century later he wrote, "I have found an old class paper dated 1800 which shows how slow Methodism advanced—Howell's class had been organized about 15 years and had regular preaching and prayer meeting."<sup>56</sup> He lists the members as follows: Nicholas Albertson, Jane Howell, John Albertson, Garret Howell, Sarah Howell, Sarah Armstrong, Jonathan Moore, Margaret Moore, John Banghart, Barnabas Swayze, Mary Swayze, Winfred Newman, Mary Drake, and Benjamin Folkner.<sup>57</sup>

Itinerant Methodist preachers had been active in the Hope area before this class was formed in 1786. Mr. Albertson gives a rare picture of these early preachers:

Woolman Hickman was a tall spair young man pale and sollem as if soon to be an inhabitant of a better world. His face appeared something like that of Stephen when he stood before the council—as the face of an angel. George Mair was an older man and appeared like a pilgrim stranger nearly worn out with labour and sorrow would soon be at his journey's end—he was a Scotchman of sound sense and great grace . . . P. Cox was a man of very small stature . . . he had a habbit when much engaged in preaching he would hold one hand up to the side of his head and lean his head a little down on that side as if it helped to support him in his labour. William Phoebus was then an interesting man . . . appeared to be healthy and zealously engaged in the good cause.<sup>58</sup>

Phoebus was not so remembered by another historian who described him as "a dignified minister—somewhat metaphysical and philosophical—one who thought for himself, and loved antiquity. He was not however a popular preacher."<sup>59</sup> This William Phoebus came from Somerset County, Maryland where he was born in 1754. He was influenced by the early Methodist preaching in Maryland and became an itinerant. In 1798 Phoebus settled down or "located" in New York City where he practiced "physic" until returning to the itineracy in 1806.<sup>60</sup>

In 1786 in Hope Methodist Nicholas Albertson recalled that the preachers were John McClaskey, a "good sound plain preacher" and "our excellent and much esteemed Brother Ezekiel Cooper—then a very interesting young man." These two preachers helped Levi Howell form a class of seven members.

Albertson adds that these members were Levi Howell, John Albertson, Garret Howell, Elizabeth Howell, Sarah Howell, Nicholas Howell, and Jane Howell (who later married Nicholas Albertson). In his manuscript Mr. Albertson felt compelled to mention that "Father Howell—active and popular in the state—was an exhorter in the church and the principal in the building of a meeting house called the Union."<sup>61</sup>

Hope meeting house is said to have been built in 1810 on land donated by John Albertson and Levi Howell. The first sermon preached in the new church was said to have been on the occasion of the funeral of Mrs. John Albertson. The long interval between the founding of a Methodist society and the building of a church edifice is a pattern found in other Methodist churches in western New Jersey. Nicholas Albertson as an old man in 1835 remarked on the slow growth of Methodism in the Hope area. The Hope society was part of the Flanders Circuit which "was large including in it part of Hunterdon County, part of Morris and extended eastward quite up into New York state and all of Sussex County as far as was Methodized and yet there was not more than 221 members."<sup>62</sup> He says Jesse Lee formed the Flanders Circuit about 1788.

Although Albertson does not contribute a lengthy explanation for this gradual growth of the denomination, he seems to place much of the blame on the unwelcome reception and even overt opposition of his Hope neighbors to Methodist travelling preachers. Prior to Levi Howell's inviting Methodist itinerants into his home in 1785 they "had been viewed by some as only a few straggling vagrants scarcely worth notice but by this time they had begun to be suspected as dangerous persons." He continued:



The alarm was sounded and many reported against them some said they were antechrist or the false prophets that should come in the last time and if it were possible shall deceive the very elect. Others said they were to be saved by their works and that they would be perfect and live without sin . . . these and such like reports were circulated whether true or false or both mixed together and were considered by many in that day to be dreadful heresy or dangerous doctrine—quite sufficient to condemn the preachers and reproach them as the rests [dregs] of society.<sup>63</sup>

Nicholas Albertson goes on to say that:

Nevertheless there was a few even in that day, who were not inferior to their fellow citizens either in property or personal qualifications or standing in society—men who had independence of mind enough to judge for themselves and act accordingly—among these primitive Methodists were—a Mr. Hazen near Hackettstown a Mr. Hunt—Mr. Levi Howell—Mr. Joseph Swayze—Mr. Michael Banghart. . . .<sup>64</sup>

From his testimony it seems clear that Mr. Albertson felt strongly that without laymen like Howell and Swayze who opened their homes to Methodist preachers including Bishop Asbury and who gathered groups of lay people together to pray, talk, learn and to share their faith, Methodism in the Hope area would not have survived or grown against the early opposition it encountered.

Looking back with the wisdom of hindsight, Nicholas Albertson recalled that "some of our neighbors who never go to hear Methodist preachers, but the scene has changed—a goodly number of their descendants are now happy and useful members of the Church."<sup>65</sup> He cites the failure of the class at Daniel Hunt's to survive his moving away and says, "some other failures seemed to be mother of triumph to some who ventured to predict that the Methodists were losing ground and would be gone in a few years or that a corn crib would hold them all after awhile—but thank the Lord we have lived to see how greatly these seers were mistaken for scarcely all the corn cribs in New Jersey would hold them now."<sup>66</sup>

To return to Francis Asbury's travels, one must note another popular preaching place on his route. On June 28, 1789 Asbury, having preached to "stony hearts" in Johnsonburg at the Episcopal church, rode on to Swayze's where he spoke on a torrid summer day. From here he and Richard Whatcoat pushed on to Butzville where they found hospitality at the home of John Axford, another of those first trustees of the Flanders church. Methodism was evidently prospering in the area for Bishop Asbury and Rev. Whatcoat "found life and liberty" among their hearers in Butzville.<sup>67</sup>

John Axford's family were originally Quakers. His father, John, Sr. and his mother Anna Beach Axford, were members of the Society of Friends in Trenton and later in Hardwick, N.J. In 1726 John Axford, Sr. is said to have come to Oxford Township with a warrant to locate any unsurveyed land. He acquired a very large tract and raised his family which included sons John, Jr., Samuel, Jonathan, and Abraham there. John Axford, Jr. who opened his home at the "big spring" to Methodist itinerants was married to Abigail Hunt.<sup>68</sup> They had nine children and when John died in 1808 he left an estate valued at \$2,661. The inventory included two volumes belonging to the Rev. Jonathan Fletcher, and two Negroes, Jack and Isabel.<sup>69</sup>

Bishop Asbury was much encouraged by his visit to Axforde in 1789 and journeyed the following day up the valley to Vienna. On June 29, 1789 he and Whatcoat held services at the home of Phillip Cummins, but Asbury recalled in the hot humidity "some of the audience slept."<sup>70</sup>

Asbury visited the Cummins farm at least five times in his travels across New Jersey. The solid stone farmhouse on a knoll overlooking the valley and the present Vienna church (built 1854) still stand in the village today. The Cummins family was said to have emigrated from Germany around 1745 to the Asbury area.<sup>71</sup> Phillip was born in Asbury town on Aug. 15, 1750, but he and his two brothers and one sister moved to Pequest as Vienna was then called. They were original settlers of the town which was known for some time as Cummins town.

Phillip Cummins married Mary Cramer and fathered eight children. His three sons were trustees of the first Vienna Methodist church. His daughter Elizabeth married Michael Banghart of nearby Bridgeville in Oxford Township.<sup>72</sup> The Banghart family were not only prominent Methodists, but neighbors of the Axforde who lived only a mile away in Butzville. Michael Banghart and his father Jacob joined Methodist societies and Michael was known as a "thorough student of the Bible."<sup>73</sup> He and Elizabeth Cummins had 14 children, two of whom became preachers! George Banghart was a noted Methodist itinerant and Wesley left the denomination to become a Presbyterian minister in Oxford. The union of these two prominent Methodist families is of special importance for historians of the early period of Methodism in New Jersey.

One remaining layman of great importance to the early period remains to be identified, although he was not a trustee of the Flanders Church. Bishop Asbury travelled to his home on May 9, 1811 in the village of Mount Bethel in Mansfield Township.<sup>74</sup> James Egbert had been induced to settle in this area by Dr. Robert Cummins, a large landowner who served as a surgeon in the Sussex Regiment during the Revolutionary War. He is said to have not been related to the Cummins family of Vienna. The doctor had a large practice in the Mt. Bethel area and historian James Snell says he sold James Egbert several tracts of land from 1798 to 1804 and that "these two men made a prosperous settlement" at Mt. Bethel.<sup>75</sup> James Egbert was a tanner by trade and is said to have come to New Jersey from Staten Island. No evidence has been found to link James with Nicholas Egbert of Readington, but since both families came from Staten Island there may indeed be some connection.

James Egbert died on Sept. 19, 1847 in Morristown at the age of 75 years. The Rev. Manning Force wrote the obituary notice for the *Christian Advocate* and said of Egbert in part, "He was brought up an Episcopalian, but was early led to attend the Methodist ministry, under which he was convinced of a change of heart, and sought and found peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>76</sup> Pastor Force noted Mr. Egbert's many years of service to the church and recalled that he "was distinguished for his liberality and hospitality, as many members of the New Jersey Conference can testify."<sup>77</sup> It was James and Rachel Egbert who deeded a lot to the Methodist society in Mt. Bethel in 1812. The church was incorporated as the Methodist Episcopal

Egbert

Church of Mansfield. In 1844 the little old frame church built on the Egbert's gift of land had become too small and uncomfortable. Judge Egbert's "cherished aim" was to build a new church. According to the Mt. Bethel Church history he accomplished his aim "giving the land and heading the subscription list, he undertook the work, hiring the masons and the carpenters by the day."<sup>78</sup> Shortly before his death James Egbert moved to Morristown where he was active in the Methodist church in that town.

#### CONCLUSION

Bishop Asbury crisscrossed western New Jersey many times during his ministry from the first tentative journey to Kingwood in 1776 to his final tour of the area in 1811. In addition to the preaching places mentioned in this paper, Asbury visited fledgling Methodist groups in Hackettstown, Newton, Lockwood, Morristown, and Verona. To examine them all would further complicate an already complex historical and genealogical picture.

A pattern emerges from following only parts of Asbury's route in western New Jersey. The Bishop rode, often accompanied by other clergymen, from the home of one sympathetic layman to another. He avoided inns or taverns whenever he could, probably for reasons of conscience as well as pocketbook, but sought out those known to be friendly to the Methodist cause. In most cases his hosts were known by travelling preachers like Ezekiel Cooper to be hospitable to the not always popular itinerants.

Whether preachers like Cooper deliberately sought to convert these particular laymen because they were respected, well-to-do local citizens, or whether the upwardly mobile laymen themselves took the initiative to invite the Methodists to preach in their homes is difficult to know. What a closer examination of these men's lives reveals beyond dispute is the status in the rural society of the late 18th century that they enjoyed. Most of the nine first trustees of the Flanders church were men of wealth and local, even state-wide, prominence. Col. William McCullough was a gentleman of considerable material wealth, a patriot, a judge, and a citizen respected throughout New Jersey. His two close friends and associates in Asbury, Daniel Hunt and William Crevelling, appear to have been men of means. Hunt donated the L15. for the land for the original chapel in Asbury and Crevelling left a tidy estate. Unfortunately Daniel Hunt moved from the area and left few traces. John Axford, Jr. was not only the son of a pioneer landowner of a large tract in Oxford but was a successful man who left an estate of over two thousand dollars in an era when many farmers left only the clothes on their backs, the bedding, a few cows and hay in the barn.

When he died in 1809 Nicholas Egbert, a prominent man in his area known to raise and sell fine horses, left his son James L100 and his wife the interest in L300 plus another L20. Jabesh Heaton owned a gristmill in Flanders and Joseph Swayze build a gristmill and owned a large farm in Hope. Finally Levi Howell, the son of a pioneer in Hope, was remembered by Nicholas Albertson as "active and popular in the state."

Without the support of these laymen and others, James Egbert, Phillip Cummins, Michael Banghart, William Godley, Tunis Melick, and Andrew Freeman, to name only a few, Methodism would possibly not have taken hold and prospered in this early period especially in the face of the criticism, suspicion, and even outright opposition of the established churches and of the local citizenry.

This pattern of strong lay leadership, family involvement, intermarriage of Methodist families, and small sharing groups of the faithful firmly established Methodism in these rural areas and led to its subsequent growth. Even today two hundred years later Methodism appears to be adapting to change and growing in a similar pattern among the ethnic minorities of this state.

In this Bicentennial year, United Methodist Churches might do well to remember their early heritage and look to the special strengths of family bonds, loving community, and obedient faith found in the first Methodist societies and still present in many small congregations of New Jersey's churches.

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